DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 089 565 HE 005 274

AUTHOR Bernstein, Paul
TITLE General Education: Image and Reality.
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 8p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Continuous Learning; Education; *Educational Objectives; Educational Theories; *General Education; *Higher Education; *Liberal Arts

ABSTRACT

What general education needs in America is more faculty and administrative support, and a thorough reexamination of the general education component of most postsecondary curricula. General education should provide an academic jointure for affective and cognitive learning so that analysis of feelings, goals, and values could be studied in tandem with the knowledge available in the realm of specialized study. General education should provide opportunities for students to become familiar with the objectives, problems and methods of the social sciences as well as the natural and physical sciences and humanities. Among the more significant general education objectives in the social sciences would be the application of its knowledge and methodologies to insure a more profound insight into the pressing issues of our time (the urban crisis, racial problems, population pressures, food supplies, and the role of women). General education should be the substantial, continuous, and integrated study of man and as such should be present in every higher education curriculum. (Author/PG)

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GENERAL EDUCATION: IMAGE AND REALITY

PAUL BERNSTEIN

HE 005 274

What general education needs in America is less lip service and more real support. It is the one educational commodity in our open society that has truly suffered from a superfluity of speeches and a dearth of daily dedication. What is clearly needed is more faculty and administrative support, and a thorough re-examination of the general education component of most post-secondary curricula. But in the current climate of economic deprivation, professional emphasis, and the academic conservatism of the American professorate there is little likelihood of a re-naissance in this area. On this pessimistic note let us examine the exalted image and the more tarnished reality.

To do this a certain context needs to be established, and this must clearly encompass my own conception of general education in an open society. Firstly, it would involve those nonspecialized insights, experiences, and skills that help the student achieve wisdom, sensitivity, greater humanity, and an integrated view of the post industrial world we inhabit. Secondly, it would involve such important intangibles as perspective, critical analysis, and alternative approaches to historical and contemporary problems. And thirdly, in the words of Daniel Bell, it would "impart a sense of coherence about human experience - heroism, pride, love, loneliness, tragedy, confrontation with death."[1] General education could also provide an academic jointure for affective and cognitive learning so that analysis of feelings, goals, and values could be studied in tandem with the knowledge available in the realm of specialized study. In this sense there is no inherent conflict between general

[1] Daniel Bell, The Reforming of General Education (New York and London, 1966), p. 175.

and specialized education. Nevertheless, their goals are generally different and should be recognized as such. This is not to suggest that my definition of general education excludes the possibility that a study of the Middle East or Victorian Literature is, by its nature, specialized and without merit. Almost any offering and experience can be developed to make a tangible contribution to general education, and I daresay that some American scholars use the forum of a specialized vehicle for this purpose and use it effectively. But more often this is not the case, and it is wiser to depend on a general education program as such for the achievement of general education objectives than an instrument designed for a different purpose. I shall say more on this point later, particularly in reference to the departmentalization factor and general education, but for the moment let me return to my definition.

General education should provide opportunities, in addition to those mentioned earlier, for students to become familiar with the objectives, problems, and methods of the social sciences as well as the natural and physical sciences and humanities. Among the more significant general education objectives in the social sciences, for example, would be the application of its knowledge and methodologies to insure a more profound insight into the pressing issues of our time. These could include the urban crisis in the U.S., racial problems of the twentieth century, population pressures and food supply, the role of women in the modern world, and differing dimensions of religious experience in the next three

decades. But these should be studied, if they are truly a segment of the student's general education, in a manner that is nonspecialist in structure, tone, and final purpose. Thus, one can draw on the knowledge of the specialized book, article, scholar, or experience but in an integrative context whose end outcome is wisdom, sensitivity, and a more complete capacity to participate in a democratic society.

For the natural and physical sciences, general education should obviously provide students with intellectual avenues that clarify the social consequences of technology as well as an insight into the nature of science, its historical development, and the philosophic issues it has brought in its train. A related "new" field of learning has developed which also holds considerable promise, and it is this area of Technology Assessment that should become more familiar to our students as part of their general education.[2] In fact, when I attended the First International Conference on Technology Assessment in The Hague last year I felt it was a forum in general education for the participants in addition to the values inherent in the study of TA alone. It was a conclave of natural and physical scientists, sociologists, economists, engineers, businessmen, state planners, demographers, oil geologists and at least one historian who sought (as in general education) to integrate their collective knowledge and experience, regardless of discipline, in an attempt to anticipate and cope with the effects

[2]For a provocative analysis of the TA movement see the article by Walter A. Hahn, "President's Message," Technology Assessment II, no. 1, pp. 4-11.

of technological change. None spoke as departmental representatives but rather as individuals who had something to offer toward the solution of common problems. Introductory courses and offerings in "Fundamentals of" did not seem necessary in the analysis of problems involving mass transit, energy shortages, and the consequences of noise. The approach was multidisciplinary, the process integrative, and the end outcome suggestive of alternative solutions to the technological impact on the world.

Perhaps I have dwelled too long on Technology Assessment, but when 75% of the people questioned in a recent Harris Poll felt there was "too much concentration on scientific progress and too little on the human side" we obviously must address ourselves to this concern. And, as in the humanities and the Social Sciences, it will not be achieved in the specialized sequences that are the required building blocks of major programs. These specialized offerings and the faculty who teach them are too often unwilling to come to grips with an analysis of technological impact not because either course or professor are unworthy, but because their purposes are different. They do not address themselves, as a <u>basic</u> task and responsibility, to the moral consequences of scientific creativity, nor do they sufficiently reflect on their role in political, economic or social decision-making after a process, commodity, machine or service is perfected. It is in answer to this latter point that general education can become a flourishing element in the undergraduate curriculum. It can and should draw on scientific and humanistic knowledge, in an integrated manner, and help students understand the characteristics of a scientific point of view as

well as the assumptions of the scientific world - objectivity, tentativeness, and consistency etc.[3]

Much more can be said by way of a comprehensive definition of general education. The ability to communicate effectively is obviously the base for much that has been said earlier and one should not quickly bypass the important areas of creativity and the generation of ideas. Nor should we lightly touch upon such humanistic concerns as critical analysis, aesthetic knowledge and pleasure, and the individual edification that can be gained from the arts and literature.

All of what has been said does not mean the abandonment of educational standards for the thin pablum of breadth. General education is not the art of once over lightly or the latest funded fad of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. It is the substantial, continuous, integrated study of man.

And now, finally, let us conclude with a word on the realities of general education. The current scene is already strewn with the silhouettes of fallen institutions. We have seen many valued colleagues and friends released because of falling enrollments, rising costs, or the demise of curricula that have fallen into student disfavor. But what has this to do with the realities of general education? A great deal. Even before the financial ratchet of the early seventies began its unwelcome clicking, general education had long been the plaything of the collegiate department.

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[3] Paul Dressel and Lewis Mayhew, General Education. Explorations in Evaluation (Washington, 1954), p. 112.

Benjamin Mehrling recently described the demise of a general education program in an incisive and personal testimony to departmental power.[4] In his description of the birth and death of an interdisciplinary approach to general education at a small midwestern college, Mehrling noted the classic causes of resistance:

1) Departmental fear that a new general educational unit would drain its resources, particularly faculty

2) Departmental fear that it would lose control over content unless the general education courses were "first courses," offerings that normally led to a major for students

3) Departmental fear that the loss of the "first course" or "introduction to" offering would cost it needed registrations, and thus, faculty.

To put it in Mehrling's words "the objections pertained to a redistribution of power which would be brought about by the establishment of a general studies sector." In the last analysis the end came because of the failure to convince enough departmentalized colleagues that the synthesis needed in an interdisciplinary approach outweighed the importance of academic territoriality.

Another dimension of this was found by Arthur Levine and John Weingert in a recent study of undergraduate education at twenty-six different American institutions. The authors found such diverse approaches as distribution requirements, core courses, freshman seminars, special programs and even experimental colleges

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[4]Benjamin Mehrling, "Developing General Studies: Recollections of a General Studies Chairman," Perspectives, Vol. 5, no. 1, Spring, 1973, p. 9.

generally failed "to provide a basis for common humanity among people." The specialization of the professorate and the resistance to even a momentary flirtation with issues and problems beyond the accustomed precincts doomed many of the programs that were studied. Distribution requirements as general education per se particularly aroused Levine and Weingert. This approach was scholarship from the vantage point of each discipline. It did not help the student see relationships and it did not bring the individually valuable insights and experiences into a unified focus. Levine and Weingert also supplied an additional caution: an interdisciplinary course in itself is not the answer. Such an offering can exhibit all of the non-integrative features of introductory courses if taught by a grouping of specialists who do not themselves commonly focus on issues, problems, or experiences as a team. Conversely, the authors supported a wholly departmental effort in general education if that effort could relate a given field or an issue within it "to the rest of the world."[5] A good example of how this might succeed was described by Frederick Ritsch in a recent article on the Converse College experiment in literature. By overcoming the objections of those who felt that only a thin veneer of many small fragments of knowledge would result, Converse launched what Professor Ritsch called "An Interdisciplinary Humanities Program As An Approach to Literature." Disciplinary walls yielded to thematic approaches and such new entities as Perspectives on Violence and Alienation and Contemporary Fiction emerged. The greatest difficulty, Ritsch noted, was with the faculty itself and some three years were required to

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[5] Arthur Levine and John Weingert, Reform of Undergraduate Education (San Francisco, 1973), pp. 50-51.

assemble a sufficient number of colleagues whose breath of interest transcended normal departmental lines. The result? At least at Converse, it was greater student motivation to write, research, rely on their own ideas, and surprisingly, a larger interest in the more classical offerings in the humanities.[6]

What, then, are the conclusions to be drawn for the future of general education in an open society?

1) If general education is to help our students achieve greater wisdom, departments must react in a less threatened manner. However, in the current educational climate, the legitimate needs of general education programs are not likely to prevail over departmental territoriality in very many institutions.

2) General education offerings clearly need more administrative support in an era which has come to exalt professional development as the sine qua non to success. As the Levine and Weingert study implied, this should be in the form of encouragement and resources.

3) We should be clear on what general education is and what it is not. It offers in itself no specific practical results unless general wisdom constitutes a pragmatic goal.

4) And finally, let us fill fewer catalog pages with broad humanistic declarations unless we have the will and means to weave a more realistic tapestry.

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[6] Frederick Ritsch, "An Interdisciplinary Humanities Program as an Approach to Literature," Perspectives, Vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 19-21.